

North Chicago, IL - U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Highland Park) and U.S. Senator Dick Durbin announced Monday that language has been secured in the FY 2004 Consolidated Omnibus Appropriations Bill calling for the integration of the North Chicago VA Medical Center and the Great Lakes Naval Hospital. The language directs the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to finalize site selection for a joint Navy/VA ambulatory care center that will serve both DoD beneficiaries and veteran patients.

"Integration of these two medical facilities is both practical and urgent," said Congressman Kirk. "Combining these two facilities saves the taxpayer money, but most importantly, ensures our veterans health care in northern Illinois far into the future."

Three years ago, the Department of Veterans Affairs was on the verge of shutting down the North Chicago VA Medical Center. If the hospital were to close, thousands of Northern Illinois veterans would have to drive to Chicago, or Milwaukee to receive services. Congressman Kirk and Senator Durbin led the fight to keep the hospital open, suggesting Great Lakes Naval Hospital and the North Chicago VA combine their services. The two facilities sit less than a mile apart from each other. The Department of Defense came on board and integration of the facilities has already begun. The Navy recently moved its mental health facility to the VA in late October.

"Navy-VA cooperation in North Chicago will become a model for excellent health care," said Kirk. "Integration between the Navy and VA will ensure the survival of veterans' health care in Northern Illinois while upgrading the care received by our Navy recruits."

The language calls for the Navy and VA secretaries to select a site for the ambulatory care center by July 30, 2004. It also calls for a proposal for design planning and funding construction of the facility by FY06. Overall cost of the new joint Navy/VA hospital is estimated to be \$170 million.